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1 March 2017

Mr Simon Ascroft
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Dear Mr Ascroft

Short inspection of Biddulph High School

Following my visit to the school on 14 February 2017 with Eddie Wilkes, Ofsted Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in May 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

A significant restructure of staffing was undertaken to allow the school to address financial constraints. You and the board of trustees used this opportunity to ensure that all leadership roles provide a strategic contribution to school's continued development. The result is a more cohesive and coherent leadership team whose members work together well and which ensures an integrated approach to monitoring and evaluation. This has improved leadership capacity and is helping to promote the school's further improvement.

Leaders recognised that outcomes for disadvantaged pupils were slow to improve. They commissioned an external review of the use and impact of pupil premium funding in 2015. As a result, a range of actions and initiatives was put in place. However, these did not result in the rapid progress expected. A further external review was conducted recently. Actions taken as a result are now having a positive impact.

The school's approach involves more focused work with feeder middle schools, and early identification to ensure that pupils receive targeted support and interventions quickly. As a result, most-able disadvantaged pupils are provided with appropriate challenge to reach their potential. An appropriate curriculum tailored to the needs of the less able disadvantaged and the less able other pupils is now provided. This is enabling them to make good progress in their learning and in developing broader life- and work-related skills.

Leaders' self-evaluation of the school is thoughtful and measured. Their judgements are based on robust evidence about strengths and weakness. Actions to address key priorities are appropriate and there is good evidence of the positive impact they are having. A regular monitoring and review cycle keeps leaders informed of the success of actions and where there is a need to revise actions.

School leaders are supported by a very well-informed and strong board of trustees that makes a valuable contribution to the strategic direction of the school. Trustees provide a high level of challenge to school leaders based on their expertise and passionate commitment to the ongoing improvement in outcomes for pupils. Minutes of board of trustee meetings confirm this. They are involved extensively in school activities, have good links with parents and are in regular communication with leaders. They are proactive in ensuring that the school continues to improve; for example, they were instrumental in requesting a recent external review of safeguarding.

Since the previous inspection, leaders have maintained and built on the strengths, and continue to address the areas for improvement, identified in the report.

Its strong links with a range of initial teacher training providers and its role as a regional hub for the School Direct route into teaching ensure that the school is involved in a good range of development activities that benefit the quality of teaching and learning across the school. Regular and effective monitoring of teaching and learning, and well-targeted support programmes, are further improving the quality of teaching. As a result, lessons are now typically characterised by appropriate challenge, particularly for the most able, including those in the sixth form. Partnership working with other schools is improving, with teachers in a range of subjects collaborating more with other schools, as well as across subjects within school.

Changes have been made to the sixth-form provision. For example, entry requirements have been reviewed to ensure that students join courses that are appropriate to their abilities and needs. The enrichment programme, coupled with a well-designed careers education programme, are strong features of provision. The sixth form is highly inclusive and, for example, provides a pathway for the most vulnerable students that develops their work skills and confidence. The positive impact of provision in the sixth form, for students from all starting points, is reflected in the fact that retention from Year 12 to Year 13 is very high, and all Year 13 students have gone on to appropriate further or higher education, employment or training.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. Staff training is regularly updated and highlights relevant current issues within the local community.

All the evidence indicates that there is a strong culture of safeguarding in the school and that opportunities to address safeguarding issues permeate the curriculum for all pupils and sixth-form students. Pupils say that they feel very safe at school and that the school encourages them to respect people from backgrounds different from their own. Responses to the staff questionnaire and to Parent View say that the school keeps pupils safe. Pupils know what to do if they feel unsafe and whom to go to if they have concerns. They receive extensive safeguarding training, including very effective 'what to do if...' training. Sixth-form students understand the risks they face, for example in relation to drug and alcohol misuse, social media and extremism, because of the assemblies and other enrichment activities that regularly focus on these areas. Sixth-form students talk about the very strong and tight-knit school community they are part of and the excellent support they receive from their teachers, which is a key reason they choose to remain at Biddulph High School.

Inspection findings

- School-based evidence indicates that disadvantaged pupils in all year groups are currently making improved progress because of the impact of more focused interventions and support. Differences between their achievement and that of other pupils nationally are diminishing, but still need to reduce further. The difference between high-ability disadvantaged pupils and other high-ability pupils in the school has almost disappeared.
- There have been no permanent exclusions in the school in recent years. Fixed-term exclusions have been historically well below the national average. Following a temporary rise in the number of exclusions due to the introduction of a new behaviour policy, they are falling again. The fall also applies to disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- Current school information indicates that attendance overall is improving. This is the case for disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. The school works hard, in partnership with a range of agencies and families, to improve outcomes for some pupils who struggle with attendance and engagement. Current school records indicate that the impact of this work is positive.

- Teaching and learning are well structured and regularly build on prior learning. Most pupils are strongly engaged with learning. The quality of teachers' questioning and a focus on challenge have been key features of professional development. The need to maintain this focus is important if pupils, and particularly the most able pupils, are to gain the highest grades they are capable of. The further development of higher order questioning, which not only checks on and tests understanding but really encourages pupils and sixth-form students to develop more sophisticated and analytical oral responses, is a key aspect of this. Teachers implement the school's marking and feedback policy well.
- The school is working rigorously on the early identification of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Leaders recognise that these pupils have not historically made strong progress. They are now tracked as a key group in the school's assessment system and staff use this information to identify the need for interventions. As a result, the progress they are making is improving.
- Greater attention is now given to preparing Year 11 pupils to be able to access the higher level of work required in the sixth form. Rigorous monitoring of the progress students make while they are in the sixth form is now in place. All students achieving below their target grades in the half-termly assessments receive regular, supervised support and mentoring. Despite this, not all sixth-form students are achieving in line with their full potential.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the focus on removing barriers to learning for all groups of pupils and sixth-form students, particularly those who are disadvantaged, is maintained so that the progress they make from their starting points, and the standards they reach, continue to improve
- teaching and learning are consistently characterised by high expectations and high levels of challenge, including through teachers' questioning, so that pupils and sixth-form students from different starting points have the opportunity to make the progress of which they are capable.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Staffordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Gwen Coates
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors held meetings with you, senior and middle leaders, groups of pupils and sixth-form students, and the chair and members of the board of trustees.

Joint learning walks with the senior leader responsible for teaching and learning took place. During these, inspectors had the opportunity to talk to pupils and sixth-form students and review their work. Inspectors also observed social times, and spoke with pupils at break- and lunchtimes.

A range of documents was reviewed, including the school's self-evaluation, as well as records and monitoring information about achievement, attendance and behaviour. The single central record was scrutinised, together with a range of school policies, including the safeguarding policy and the special educational needs information report. Pupil premium funding reviews, action plans and impact statements were also reviewed.

Inspectors took into account the 54 responses to Parent View, the 46 responses to Ofsted's online staff questionnaire and the 56 responses to the pupil questionnaire.